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Why Are They So Afraid Of School Choice?

(and What They Could Learn From Massachusetts) *

Charles L. Glenn, Ed.D., Ph.D.

I. Introduction

Whether to adopt public policies that encourage parents to choose the schools their children will attend -- and that require schools to convince parents to volunteer their children -- has become the most hotly-debated item on the American education reform agenda. For those who follow education policy debates, each week seems to bring a new claim for the merits of school choice or a new prediction that it would be disastrous for American education.

The debate is marked, unfortunately, by more heat than light; parent choice of schools is a reform whose supporters and opponents alike rely primarily upon mental experiments, spinning scenarios in which parent choice is a panacea for the ills of American education, or sends it into a rapid decline. They would do better to consider the actual results of systems of parent choice which already function in other nations[1] -- and in ten Massachusetts cities.

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Endorsed by presidents Reagan and Bush, by the nation's governors, by Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers and by many business leaders, policies promoting school choice are alleged to have the potential of revitalizing the nation's lagging education system by bringing salutary market forces to bear, of enhancing teacher professionalism, of increasing the satisfaction of parents and their engagement with the schooling of their children, of providing more equal access to educational opportunities for poor and minority children, of reducing conflict over the goals and methods of education and of removing the heavy hand of government from the classroom. New reports from the Brookings Institution and the Rand Corporation provide research support to the contention that parent choice creates an entrepreneurial climate encouraging schools to develop a clarity of focus and purpose that makes them more effective.[2]

But parent choice of schools is strongly resisted by the National Education Association, many civil rights leaders, and -- by all indications -- by most public educators.

Our focus here will not be upon the arguments in support of choice, arguments that I have made elsewhere,[3] nor upon the on-going debates over whether research has demonstrated this connection, but with the arguments **against** policies encouraging parents to choose schools for their children. Why are such policies deeply mistrusted by many advocates for the interests of children, and what answers to their concerns can be given from the very extensive experience with public school choice in Massachusetts?

It is striking how little the thinking of most educators and the actual practice of most school systems has been affected by high-level advocacy of choice or by the growing evidence that most Americans believe parents **should** be permitted to decide where

their children will be schooled.[4] Quick as American educators are to embrace other new fads, it is clear that their resistance to parent choice is deep-rooted.

The great majority of American schoolchildren are assigned to particular public schools on the basis of where they live -- which often means: where their parents can afford to live. What choice of schools exists (and there is actually a great deal) is largely that exercised by middle-class parents in choosing a neighborhood or suburban community.*

Apart from residential decisions, the possibility of school choice tends to come into play only for children with quite distinctive needs. It is commonly acknowledged by educators that not every school will meet the needs of a child with a particular handicap or learning disability, but somehow it is not considered legitimate to take educational considerations into account in deciding which school will best challenge and support other children.

While a constant lament of teachers and principals is that parents are not supportive of the work of the school, the same professionals often resist proposals that parents be allowed to select a school that they can support wholeheartedly.

Assigning pupils to schools on the basis of where they live has some practical advantages, but the opposition by most of those who speak for public education to parent choice unlimited by

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* Linda Darling-Hammond and Sheila Nataraj Kirby found that 53 percent of public school parents "had considered public school quality as an important factor in determining residential location" ("Public Policy and Private Choice: The Case of Minnesota," Comparing Public and Private Schools, Volume 1: Institutions and Organizations, Thomas James and Henry M. Levin, editors, New York: The Falmer Press, 1988, 248.

residence suggests that deeper considerations than mere practicality are in play.

After all, geographically-based assignments also create problems for school systems; as demographic changes increase or decrease the number of school-aged children in a particular area, attendance areas must be redrawn, portable classrooms added, schools closed (usually over fierce local opposition), or the grade-levels assigned to each building reshuffled. The reality of changing urban residential patterns, in particular, is that many pupils cannot attend their neighborhood school. "Neighborhoods" rarely produce just the right number of children at each grade level to fill up schools precisely, even if everyone wanted their neighborhood school -- which they do not.*

No, the opposition to allowing parents to choose the schools their children will attend seems to derive from anxieties that have little to do with the practical demands of school management.

On the most obvious level, there is a resistance to encouraging parents to evaluate how well schools and those who work in schools will meet the needs of their children, in order to make a well-founded choice.

Educators have been extremely resistant to accountability for performance, even when exercised by professionals above them in the hierarchy of school systems. Many explain away even such

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* One of the benefits of universal choice in Massachusetts cities has been to minimize the impact of neighborhood population changes on local schools. In Fall River, for example, the Wiley School has 258 pupils in its former attendance area, while the Fowler has 90; this would produce an average class size of 43 at the Wiley and 13 at the Fowler if every pupil attended a neighborhood school. As a result of parent choices, each has 25-26 pupils per class. In Holyoke, the Lawrence School has a capacity of 530 but 1,042 pupils in its attendance zone, while the McMahon has a capacity of 300 but only 118 in its attendance zone. Universal parent choice makes it possible to assign the more popular schools to their optimal level, while under-enrolling the schools that fewer parents choose, even if they are located in densely-populated areas.

objective outcome measures as standardized test scores as reflecting only the family background of children rather than also to a significant extent the skill and effort of teachers, though this would seem to undercut their own contention that formal schooling is of supreme importance.*

Thus one of the most common objections to allowing ordinary (non-tuition paying) parents to select schools is that they are incapable of making wise judgments about the quality offered by different schools -- or perhaps not even interested in doing so. This comes curiously from a profession that generally opposes allowing **anyone** (however wise or well-informed) to make judgments that any school or teacher is not doing a good job.

The fact that judgments by parents could have unpleasant consequences for the staff of an unpopular school has not escaped the attention of educators. "We would never support a bill that could result in an ineffective school being forced to close," the author was told by the vice-president of a state teachers' association.

Material interests cannot account fully for educators' visceral opposition to parent choice, however. The "myth of the common school," the conviction that public schools have a sacred mission "to create in the entire youth of a nation common

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* This excuse for poor pupil performance is a debased version of research findings reported by Coleman and others in 1966 and by Jencks and others in 1972; research suggesting that how teachers and others perform **does** make a difference (Rutter and others 1979, Mortimore and others 1988) could be -- but is not -- used to draw the unwelcome conclusion that they should be held accountable for performing effectively, and rewarded or sanctioned accordingly (James S. Coleman and others, Equality of Educational Opportunity, Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1966; Christopher Jencks and others, Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America, New York: Harper & Row, 1972; Michael Rutter and others, Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary schools and their effects on children, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979; Peter Mortimore and others, School Matters, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

attitudes, loyalties, and values, and to do so under central direction by the state"[5] remains immensely powerful as well.

Publicly-supported parent choice, we are frequently told, will lead to the establishment of schools dedicated to all sorts of bizarre and unhealthy missions: Nazi schools, survivalist schools, Rastifarian schools, fundamentalist schools, schools that pander to the desire of parents for after-school care . .. Yet parents already have a right to send their children to distinctive schools at their own expense and virtually no one, since a Supreme Court ruling in 1925,[6] has argued seriously that this right should be denied. Many parents do choose fundamentalist schools, few (if any) Nazi schools, with choice limited only by their willingness and ability to pay for such schooling.

Despite the fact that a disproportionate share of public school educators choose not to send their own children to common public schools,[*] the idea that these schools have a sacred and irreplaceable mission to shape future citizens -- and particularly the children of the poor -- retains its grip on their self-concept. Perhaps the grip has been all the stronger because elementary and secondary educators have never been well paid, and the social compensations of the job have declined in recent decades.

For these and no doubt other reasons, then, parent choice is highly unpopular with the education establishment. But resistance to judgments by parents, fear of job insecurity, the possession of a mission civilisatrice do not make for good public rhetoric in relation to a reform for which so much support exists.

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[*] An often-cited (and never, to my knowledge, refuted) study by the American Enterprise Institute, released in 1988, found that between 25 and 35 percent of the public school teachers (compared with 14 percent of the general population) in nine large cities sent their children to non-public schools.

The primary argument used in public debate by opponents of parent choice of schools, instead, has been that it will produce new inequities in educational opportunity, "winners and losers."* The more sophisticated parents, the more academically-able students will take advantage of a system of school choice to leave their urban neighborhood schools, this argument typically goes, with the inevitable result that those who are left will be as neglected in their educational as (allegedly) in their family life.

While this argument can be shown to be factually wrong, it is in a sense morally correct. Factually wrong in two ways: the present system of residence-based assignments has by no means made winners of urban and minority children,** and there is ample evidence that parent choice does not have to lead to "winners and losers," as we will see when we look at the evidence from Massachusetts.

Morally correct in this sense, that if parent choice is to gain general acceptance as a strategy for fundamental educational reform, it must be shown to have a positive effect on the quality of education available to <u>all</u> students.

It is not enough, in arguing for the benefits of choice, to point to the success of some urban magnet schools, if this is a success of scarcity, won at the expense of other schools and the pupils who must attend them.

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* In a sample of twenty articles and policy statements critical of parent choice of schools, I found that eighteen stressed "winners and losers," seven, that parents cannot make good choices, six, that segregation might result, and four, that choice policies would divert attention from improving all schools.

** Nor has it prevented thousands of parents from taking their children **out of their neighborhood schools**, under open enrollment and other school system policies that are commonly found to have increased racial and class segregation.

The challenge for public policy, surely, is so to organize parent choice of schools that, over time, all schools will improve and all pupils benefit.*

Opponents of choice frequently charge that it will benefit only those with sophistication and resources, and thus lead to new inequities. Schools and programs that admit pupils on the basis of choice "represent a major assault on the educational opportunities of the nation's most vulnerable children;" they will be the victims of a "new improved sorting machine."[7]

While some supporters of choice accept such an outcome with a certain complacency,[8] those who have actually implemented reform plans based upon parent choice have taken care to do so in ways that seek to protect equal access and (when relevant) desegregation.

The most consistent such approach is universal "controlled choice," the policy under which the public schools attended by more than 145,000 Massachusetts students now operate. Unlike "winner-take-all, devil-take-the-hindmost" strategies of competition among schools, the Massachusetts system of controlled choice seeks to provide comparable benefits to **all** pupils and also to increase the effective participation of low-income and minority children and their parents in the process of education, while stimulating every school (not just a few magnet schools) to become more effective.

Controlled choice has drawn attacks from the other flank, from those who argue that establishing any controls in the name of equity does fatal damage to the very principle of the free market,

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* This is entirely different from the position of Keith Geiger, President of the National Education Association, that we should make all schools excellent **first**, and only then have choice among them. Parent choice helps powerfully to create the conditions for improved school quality.

gives a misleading impression that parents have any real options, and prevents fundamental school improvements.*

A careful examination of the actual functioning and results of controlled choice in Massachusetts should lay to rest the more exuberant fantasies of those who see choice as a menacing elevation of private over public concerns.[9] Letting parents choose demonstrably **works**, and it does so without unacceptable costs to individual interests or to the common weal.

The Massachusetts experience also shows that placing restrictions on choice to promote integration does not deprive it of liberating power.

On the other hand, this experience points beyond itself to directions in which choice-based reforms must move in order to have their full effect. There must be opportunities for groups of teachers and groups of parents to create schools that reflect their highest vision of education, within a framework of common expectations.

II. School Choice: Nothing New

Individuals with resources and sophistication have always exercised choice of schooling for their children, a fact lamented by Horace Mann in his Common School Journal (May 1, 1839) but accepted as inevitable by social and education reformers, many of whom have themselves turned to private schools or to the public schools of affluent communities when it came to the education of their own children.

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* "Controlled choice is a Massachusetts specialty -- sold to the gullible world of choice advocates as another Massachusetts miracle. In fact, it is a system in which the real choices of many parents cannot be honored," according to Abigail Thernstrom (see endnote 31).

It has been to educational alternatives for the children of ordinary people, and especially of the poor and of immigrants, that elite reformers and shapers of opinion, for two centuries, have objected. Catholic schools, in particular, have been perceived as a grave threat to the American political and social system throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries.[10] Only in recent years have evangelical and fundamentalist schools come to seem the greater menace.

Although non-government schools for the children of ordinary people have generally not been outlawed,* they have labored under an elite disapproval that has led to the adoption, by many states, of restrictions on public funding for such alternatives that are even more stringent than those required under post-war interpretations of the First Amendment.

In addition to choices to pay tuition to non-public schools, and choices of where to live based upon the perceived quality of local public schools, there have also commonly been policies under which some parents could ask for a transfer to a different public school. Such individual choices, though subject to approval by school officials, have often resulted in racial and class segregation as upwardly-mobile or racially-prejudiced parents sought to move their children out of schools in neighborhoods in which they were economically constrained to live.**

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* With the exception of an Oregon statute adopted in the twenties, under the influence of the Ku Klux Klan, and struck down by the Supreme Court's ruling in Pierce v. Society of Sisters (see endnote 6).

** In Scotland, upwardly-mobile working-class parents are more likely than middle-class parents to take advantage of policies allowing school choice, as they seek to allow their children to escape, for their schooling, the social environment in which they are forced to live. "The primary reason (60 percent) given by parents requesting an elementary level assignment was avoidance of their local school, often because of the perceived roughness of its students, and preference of another for safety and school climate considerations" (research cited in Glenn, Choice of Schools in Six Nations [endnote 1], 136).

The Brown decision, after all, was in response to a suit brought on behalf of Negro children who were not allowed to attend the closest school because it was reserved for white children; thus it was in a sense about the denial of choice in states with legally-established school segregation. When desegregation attention turned North, however, it became clear that one of the causes of de facto segregation was that white parents were using local transfer policies (often called "open enrollment") to take their children out of schools in racially-changing neighborhoods and enroll them in schools with fewer minority students. This became one of the smoking guns of Fourteenth Amendment liability findings in Boston and other cities, and restrictions on such choices became a major part of court-ordered remedies.

Meanwhile, minority parents were, in many communities, taking advantage of the same transfer policies to seek to enroll their children in schools that they perceived as offering higher expectations and a better environment than their neighborhood schools; in effect, they agreed with their white neighbors about the undesirability of the local school! Some communities under pressure to desegregate, including Chicago, sought to use such voluntary transfers by minority students as the primary component of their desegregation efforts. Closing older school buildings or failing to build new ones in minority neighborhoods with growing numbers of students was a way to force more parents to "volunteer" their children for transfers.

In an effort to respond to criticism that the burden of desegregation was being borne disproportionately or entirely by its intended beneficiaries, a growing number of school systems developed magnet schools as a means of persuading white parents

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For many urban white ethnic parents in the United States, racial differences create a perception of class differences -- sometimes correct, sometimes not -- leading to similar decisions.

to volunteer their children for schools located in minority or racially-mixed areas.

Magnet schools worked -- and continue to work -- very well in school systems with relatively few minority students concentrated residentially so that they attend distinctive-ly minority schools. If space was available at these schools, or could be made available by denying enrollment to some of the pupils living nearby, and if a program could be developed to attract white volunteers, the school system could improve the racial balance of the school while vaunting itself on a high-quality new program.[11]

Suddenly, educational quality and innovation (at least in some schools) became essential if school systems -- and elected officials -- were to avoid the controversy associated with mandatory desegregation. In the process, the belief that a single formula for schooling was best for every student received a blow from which it shows no signs of recovering (though the vestiges of this belief, including counter-productive procedures and officials, remain strongly in place, like the trenches on the Western Front after the troops went home!).

Massachusetts, which in 1965 had been the first state to adopt legislation calling for racial balance in its schools, repealed some of its enforcement provisions in 1974 while substituting a program to encourage the development of magnet schools as a means of desegregating at less political cost. Funded at first at $2 million, the annual appropriation quickly grew to over $5 million, together with 90 percent of the cost of facilities and millions more in transportation necessary to operate magnet schools.

Although magnet schools were generally a considerable success in the cities that adopted them, it began to be clear that they had negative side effects.

Magnets are often exciting schools with highly-committed parents and teachers and a freedom to pilot new ways of learning.* Who could object to that?

But successful magnet schools create new problems. While expanding the opportunity of parents to choose, magnet schools also -- precisely to the extent that they are successful in doing so -- increase the number of disappointed applicants and thus of children assigned **involuntarily**. Typically they have several times as many applicants as they can accept, so that hopes are raised only to be disappointed. Since magnet schools, limited in their capacity, cannot deliver on the promise of choice for all, parents have been placed in the position of waiting all night to register their children for a scarce seat in a public school. In Springfield (MA) this year, only 37 percent of the applicants to magnet schools could be accommodated, while Worcester could accept only 600 of 1,700 applicants to a new citywide magnet school.

By definition intended to be more attractive than other schools, and often given additional resources and a freedom to be distinctive that other schools do not enjoy, magnets drain energetic and motivated staff and parents as well as funding from non-magnet schools. In many communities, though not in Massachusetts, magnet schools are also allowed to screen and select among applicants, and thus leave other schools with the more troublesome and less academically-able students.

In addition, since the focus has been upon achieving a racially-integrated enrollment at the individual magnet school rather than

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* Good examples would be two k-8 schools in Massachu-setts, the City School in Lowell, where the various academic competencies are learned through participation in a "micro-society," and the Rafael Hernandez School in Boston, where all pupils learn in Spanish as well as English.

in the system as a whole, the effect may be to make other schools even more segregated. The federal magnet school assistance program continues to operate under policies that, according to critics, forces school systems to "intentionally maintain 100 percent minority schools in order to keep up white enrollment in their federally funded magnets."[12] In Chicago and other large cities that have relied primarily upon magnet schools to meet their desegregation obligations, many schools remain completely segregated.[13]

Milwaukee is often touted by magnet school proponents as an example of the virtues of magnet schools. The burdens of creating these schools, and the benefits of attending them, however, were not distributed fairly between white and minority children. Schools were closed in minority neighborhoods, and others converted to magnet schools with half the seats reserved for white volunteers; the combined effect was that a high proportion of the minority students were forced to bear the burden of moving to another part of the city. A recent report by Charles Willie and others found "disparity in the quality of schools in the Milwaukee Public Schools system; inequity by race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status in opportunities to attend specialty [magnet] schools and specialty programs; continuing racial isolation in a number of schools; a student assignment process which suggests that specialty schools are better than other schools" and other problems.[14]

A study of the characteristics of effective schools as exemplified in Milwaukee provides confirming evidence that "[m]agnet schools may serve their functions of providing some degree of voluntary integration and of keeping middle-class students in the urban system; however, the price is obviously a dual school system."[15] The same charge has been brought against magnet or specialty schools in New York City, Philadelphia, Washington, Boston and other cities.[16]

Controlled choice was developed in Massachusetts in response to a growing ambivalence about magnet schools, a concern that what had worked well for a few thousand urban students be somehow made to work for several hundred thousand, by insisting that all schools become sufficiently safe and effective to attract students on a voluntary basis. Just as nations cannot endure "half slave and half free" and economies cannot successfully combine central control with genuine market forces, so school systems that want to put choice to work for equity and school improvement must be prepared to make it the universal basis for student assignment.

III. The Massachusetts Model

In recent years, out of concern for a growing gap between magnet and other schools, my office has encouraged Massachusetts cities to expand their provision of magnet schools into "controlled choice" policies -- pioneered in Cambridge -- under which attendance areas for individual schools are abolished and all pupils are enrolled in all schools on the basis of choice.

Controlled choice works like this: automatic assignment of pupils to schools on the basis of where they live is abolished, and the parents of children new to the school system or moving to the next level of schooling receive information and (if they wish) counseling about all options before indicating preferences. Assignments are then made that satisfy these preferences so far as is consistent with available capacities and local policies and requirements, which may include desegregation.**

** Controlled choice assignments seek to satisfy, so far as possible, the preferences of

The goal has been to extend the benefits of choice -- amply demonstrated by the magnet schools -- to all schools and all pupils.

Universal choice policies, often called "controlled choice" to distinguish them from open enrollment schemes, are intended to accomplish four objectives:

(1) to give all pupils in a community (or in a geographical section of a larger city) equal access to every public school, not limited by where their families can afford to live;

(2) to involve all parents (not just the most sophisticated) in making informed decisions about where their children will go to school;

(3) to create pressure for the improvement, over time, of every school through eliminating guaranteed enrollment on the basis of residence; and

(4) where necessary, to achieve racial desegregation of every school with as few mandatory assignments as possible.

Ten Massachusetts cities are implementing assignment plans based upon universal controlled choice:

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parents, but various constraints are applied to the actual assignments. For example, pupils living within a specified distance of a school may be given preferential access to the available seats, thus disadvantaging (though not excluding absolutely) those who live at a distance. Similarly, race or gender balance criteria may be applied. These are policy decisions that vary from plan to plan. While it is thus incorrect that desegregation is of the essence of controlled choice, it does constitute a powerful means of achieving desegregation when that is required.

Boston	magnet 1969, universal choice 1989
Cambridge	magnet 1975, universal choice 1981
Chelsea	universal choice implemented in 1990
Fall River	universal choice implemented in 1988
Holyoke	magnet 1984, universal choice 1990
Lawrence	universal choice implemented in 1988
Lowell	magnet 1982, universal choice 1987
Northampton	universal choice implemented in 1990
Salem	universal choice implemented in 1990
Springfield	magnet 1975, universal choice 1991

Together, these ten school systems enroll over 145,000 pupils, 18 percent of Massachusetts's public school population.

Six other Massachusetts cities (Lynn, Medford, Methuen, New Bedford, Revere and Worcester) have chosen to retain assignment plans driven by geography as well as by parent choice, and to seek to achieve desegregation by moving programs around and by

magnet schools. That 38 percent of the newly-enrolling elementary pupils in Worcester are in non-neighborhood schools suggests that choice is a major factor in school assignments in these communities as well.

As a result of state concerns about the fairness and effectiveness of magnet schools unless placed within a system-wide policy framework approach, Lynn, New Bedford and Worcester have adopted an important element of universal choice as implemented elsewhere in Massachusetts: centralized enrollment of all new pupils, including parent information and counseling about the options available.*

These six school systems operating magnet schools and other forms of parent choice, while maintaining residential attendance zones, enroll more than 60,000 students, 7 percent of the Massachusetts total. There are thus over 200,000 students altogether (25 percent of the state's public school enrollment) attending schools in communities that are actively encouraging parent choice. To these could be added the town of Acton, which quite independently adopted its own form of controlled choice a decade ago,[17] and the 39 suburban communities that have, for more than twenty years, enrolled urban minority students under a voluntary program with nearly 4,000 participants.

The adoption of universal controlled choice has raised the stakes for former magnet and non-magnet schools alike. The former magnet schools, which had become rather complacent, no longer

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* These plans could in fact be described as a variation on controlled choice (since all parents are systematically invited to consider all available options and a substantial proportion take advantage of this opportunity), with a guarantee of the "neighborhood school" for those who select it that is only different in degree from the neighborhood preference built into controlled choice plans. The guarantee does provide a sort of protective tariff behind which schools can shelter from the pressure to become more effective in response to parent demand.

have a monopoly on choice, and some are proving distinctly less popular than other schools that are licensed to compete for students for the first time.

The non-magnet schools could in theory have sought to hold "their" students, but in reality there was little encouragement to find out what would satisfy parents and to become more effective educationally. Each school was guaranteed an enrollment from its assigned residential district as a result of the limited number of seats in magnet schools. Now they must hustle to assure themselves of a decent market share.

Universal choice removes all enrollment guarantees while (properly run) providing support for program development so that schools initially unpopular will have a chance to go through significant changes. The great unanswered question, as we will see below, is whether real sanctions will be imposed upon the staff of schools which continue to fail to attract applicants.

Experience in Massachusetts has made clear that parent choice does not function **by itself** to produce the benefits frequently claimed. The "invisible hand" is not enough. A well-designed strategy for putting choice to work for educational reform should include three elements:

(a) procedures to assure equal access unlimited by race, wealth or influence, to maintain confidence in the fairness of the admission process, and (where required by law or sought as a matter of policy) to promote the racial integration of each school;

(b) effective outreach and individual counseling to assure that as high a proportion as possible of parents make conscious, informed decisions about the schools that will serve their children well; and

(c) measures to assure that there are real educational choices available, including (1) removal of bureaucratic requirements that limit new approaches desired by parents and teachers, (2) help to schools that are not able to attract applications, (3) leadership and other changes if such schools do not change over time, and (4) opportunities for groups of teachers, parents, or others to initiate additional alternatives within or outside existing structures.

Controlled choice provides a framework -- and a powerful incentive -- for bringing together these elements in a powerful combination with school-based management and pedagogical reform.[18]

IV. Responding to Criticisms of Choice:

Parent choice of schools has generally been advanced as a policy either by those primarily concerned with individual liberty and rights of conscience or (more recently) by those convinced that market forces will lead to educational reform.[19] Almost all of the actual practice of officially-sponsored parent choice among American public schools, however, has been designed and implemented in the name of racial justice, as a means of school desegregation.

Some advocates of a more just education system, indeed, contend that parent choice can make a vital contribution to creating such a system, by breaking the link between residence (and thus income) and access to educational opportunities; under a well-designed choice plan, geography is no longer destiny. Coons and Sugarman insist that choice can "create opportunities for integration that lie beyond the reach of legal compulsion; it is in many instances the only hope for integration. . . Integration that occurs by choice is stable and enduring."[20]

Access of black pupils to a wide range of educational opportunities, Areen and Jencks concluded in a major policy study, would be expanded by a system of parent choice.[21]

Diversity itself, in response to the varied needs of students and desires of parents, is presented as a desirable reform in the conclusions of Jencks's influential 1972 study of the effects of schooling: "diversity should be an explicit objective of schools and school systems. No single home-away-from-home can be ideal for all children. . . . The ideal system is one that provides as many varieties of schooling as its children and parents want and finds ways of matching children to schools that suit them."[22]

Most comments on choice from equity advocates have been negative, however. The most common reason for this attitude, as noted above, has been the conviction that choice leads to there being winners and losers, with poor and minority children and their families inevitably being hurt more than helped.

It is possible to distinguish at least seven criticisms brought against parent choice. First, that choice is often among schools that are, in a formal sense, of differing levels and expectations. Second, that choice is usually among schools that, while formally equivalent, in fact differ in quality. Third, that parents (at least poor parents) don't really want to choose a school for their children or, by an alternative theory, are incapable of doing so in the best interest of their children. Fourth, that choice is illusory because many parents are disappointed as a result of desegregation and other restrictions. Fifth, that parents are often misled about the options available in the interest of creating an appearance that choice is satisfactory to those affected by it. Sixth, that the institution of parent choice will lead to all sorts of weird and divisive options, as fanatics of every stripe and/or unscrupulous entrepreneurs take advantage of

choice to peddle their wares. Or, seventh, that choice will to the contrary **not** lead to real diversity because school staff lack the imagination and professionalism to create real alternatives.

In short, a full set of predictions of disaster! After ten years in which choice has become the primary basis for school attendance in a growing number of Massachusetts cities, however, disaster shows no signs of occurring.

First Charge: **Choice is among schools that are, in a formal sense, of differing levels and expectations**

This charge has been brought, with considerable resonance, by the Chicago-based advocacy organization Designs for Change. Their study, with the evocative title The New Improved Sorting Machine, looks at a number of practices in secondary education, including "high school admission, within-school tracking and grouping, and practices employed in promotion from grade to grade."[23] Data is drawn from New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston.

While much of the study focuses upon tracking and retention -in-grade, its findings about the many educational options in these cities ("high school options have great potential for increasing educational inequality"*) have attracted the most attention, and have been taken as a fundamental indictment of school choice.

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* Emphasis in the original.

While willing to grant that some of the options have merit, the authors suggest that "correcting the inequities and dangers of choice may be impossible."[24]

The "dangers of choice" is a curious phrase, reminiscent of concerns that "too much freedom" is unsafe. In fact, as the details of their study show, the real problem is **too little**, not too much choice.

Much of the evidence offered by Designs for Change that choice leads to inequities is based upon Boston's three selective examination schools, which long pre-date the establishment of a school choice policy.* Boston Latin School, as the authors note, "has continued for 350 years as the premier selective admissions high school within the Boston Public Schools."[25]

Now, it is certainly possible to argue that Boston operates a two-tiered system of education, and that poor and minority students suffer disadvantages as a result. It is also possible to argue that the existence of these highly-academic schools represents a life-line for hundreds of poor but ambitious students each year, offering them an opportunity that no comprehensive urban high school would provide. And it is possible to support the continued existence of these options -- which enroll one secondary student in four in the system -- while urging that their student selection and support practices be changed. As the state official with primary responsibility for such issues, I have taken all three positions![26]

But the argument about whether there should be selective secondary schools in a large system is not an argument about

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* Nor are the findings cited in the study, at least with respect to Boston, especially convincing. Only 23 percent of the students in Boston's three examination schools are low-income, they report, in contrast with 25 percent of the system's enrollment; the disparity does not seem extreme.

parent choice of schools at all; indeed, parents do not "choose" Boston Latin School, any more than they choose a German Gymnasium. An invitation is extended, based upon academic achievement and a standardized test, and few are those who decline it.

Designs for Change opposes, on grounds of equity, a variety of selection practices employed by many urban school systems. Fair enough, but their study does not really engage the issue of **parent choice** as such at all.

It is unfortunately a common practice on the part of the critics of policies of parent choice to confuse them with other aspects of the functioning of public education to which they object. Of course choices have always been one aspect of dysfunctions and injustices of all types;* the purpose of choice policies is precisely to assure that such negative side-effects of the decision-making which already occurs are minimized, and that the power of parents taking active responsibility for education is guided into channels that will benefit their children without harming the children of others.

The problem in Boston is that the examination schools are virtually the only real choices -- choices of value -- most parents feel they have for secondary education within the public school system. Those whose children are not admitted are strongly inclined, if they have the resources, to quit the system, while other high schools have been defined more by what they are not than by what they are and can offer. The solution, surely, is not to eliminate the examination school alternative through reinstituting comprehensive high schools, but to assure that **all** of

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* Any good theologian would explain that the human freedom to make choices permits human sinfulness -- but that this is not a reason to abandon freedom!

the schools and programs are worth choosing, clearly focused, demanding, and distinctive.

Boston has recently adopted, with state approval, a comprehensive plan for secondary education that will require each school to rely upon choice for its entire enrollment on the basis of a clear and distinctive focus and explicit educational outcomes. The solution to the problems caused by "choice" among Boston high schools, we have concluded, is *more* real choice, not less.

The recommendations made by Designs for Change are, in contrast with their factual findings, generally sound. School systems should (and Boston does, they found) provide "clear administrative oversight over all options high schools and programs."[27] Students should apply to options based upon their interests, and each school or program should seek to reflect system-wide enrollments. Information about options must be disseminated effectively. And, in a conclusion completely consistent with the Massachusetts approach to parent choice of schools, they recommend that "it is essential that carefully controlled choice be pursued as one facet of an overall effort to improve educational quality for all students."[28]

Second Charge: **Choice is among schools that, while formally equivalent, in fact differ widely in quality.**

Some critics claim that there are so few desirable schools in most cities that indicating a number of preferences is the same as having no real choice. My own experience over twenty years with children in eight different Boston public schools suggests

that the charge is unfair, though certainly there are schools to which I would not want to entrust one of my children. The fact, indeed, that (under universal controlled choice) it is possible for children of middle-class parents to be assigned to any school in the system creates pressure to assure that every school will become acceptable or appropriately go out of business.

This is, after all, one of the primary reasons to institute universal choice. It is surely not right to continue, as we do, to operate schools that well-informed parents would not want their children to attend, even if the parents whose children actually attend those schools do not know enough to protest. The existence of deplorable schools is not an argument against choice, however, since children have been assigned to them involuntarily all along!

Many critics of choice make the fundamental error of assuming that the initial condition of few schools that are acceptable options will continue indefinitely. They fail to recognize that schools go through changes that make them more attractive (because more effective and responsive to the concerns of parents) under the impact of a well-designed system of choice.

As an example of how school selections change, analysis of first-place preferences in Boston for 6th grade enrollment in 1989 (the first year of controlled choice in Boston) and 1990 shows that the number of relatively popular schools had already doubled in the second year of controlled choice. The strong lead of a few schools was reduced as others "tried harder."

On the other hand, the least popular schools attracted even smaller numbers of applicants in the second year. Three were closed; others are on a danger list receiving immediate attention to be strengthened or -- that failing after an honest effort -- to be closed and perhaps reopened "under new management".

Boston Middle Schools Ranked by Total First Preferences

	May 90	Share		May 89	Share
Timilty	348	15%	Timilty	416	19%
Barnes	215	9%	Taft	231	10%
McCormack	214	9%	Lewenberg	192	9%
Irving	165	7%	Rogers	135	6%
Curley	137	6%	Curley	118	5%
Rogers	132	6%	Barnes	116	5%
Edwards	125	5%			
Lewenberg	122	5%	Cleveland	99	4%
Taft	108	5%	McCormack	98	4%
Edison	107	5%	Edison	80	4%
Cleveland	106	5%	Edwards	79	4%
King	105	5%	Irving	79	4%
			Gavin	78	3%
Gavin	77	3%	Thompson	75	3%
Thompson	62	3%	Wheatley	65	3%
Wilson	57	2%	McKay	57	3%
Shaw	49	2%	King	51	2%
Wheatley	41	2%	Dearborn	47	2%
Dearborn	26	1%	Wilson	40	2%
Lewis	9	0%	Shaw	40	2%
			Holmes	39	2%
			Mackey	36	2%
			Lewis	15	1%

While location influences selections, it does not explain why the Timilty is so much more popular than the Lewis, Dearborn and Wheatley, all in the same Roxbury section of the city. Educational considerations are clearly at work as well.

The goal of a choice plan cannot realistically be to assign every student to the first preference school, but universal choice will not function as it should unless every student can be assigned to an **acceptable** school. This can only happen over time, as the natural pressure of choice combines with outside support to strengthen the weaker schools or -- if they cannot be strengthened -- to change staff or close them down.

Boston's controlled choice plan provides explicitly for a three-year period during which the schools that attract fewer applicants will be helped to change their programs and how they are perceived . . . or else.

In the first year, the Zone Parent Information Centers are to conduct inquiries on why certain schools are not attracting applicants, and these schools are expected to take remedial measures. With the strong encouragement of the State, which funds the parent information and program development effort, the Zone Superintendents selected 22 schools for an intensive restructuring effort. Next year, the Zones will assess each under-subscribed school and make specific recommendations for improvements, "including a review of the school's educational leadership" with "appropriate recommendations for possible changes." The following year, the Zone Superintendent and Planning Council "may take whatever measures necessary to make the [still undersubscribed] school more attractive including changing the school's educational leader and major restructuring of the school's educational mission."[29]

Children attend schools that are of uneven quality; that is an unfortunate given, and always has been; it has been created not by the choice of parents but by neglect and complacency on the part of educators and public officials. The power of parent choice as an impetus for school reform is that schools cannot

remain seriously inadequate, so long as parents are given accurate information and honest counseling. Unless the third charge is correct . . ..

Third Charge: **Parents (at least poor parents) don't really want to choose a school for their children or are incapable of doing so in the best interest of their children.**

The first half of this charge can be dismissed out-of-hand; as Massachusetts Senate President Bulger is fond of saying, "everyone supports school choice -- for his own children!"

State-funded parent surveys conducted in Massachusetts cities implementing school choice consistently show ten- or twenty-to-one support for being able to choose among schools, as do surveys in other nations.[30]

Some critics insist, indeed, that "academic excellence is seldom what parents chiefly value in a school. A convenient location, a particular social atmosphere, good sports facilities: these are the sorts of considerations that govern."[31] Perhaps it would be appropriate to say: so what! As Jencks and his associates concluded in their celebrated study of Inequality, "society as a whole rarely has a compelling interest in limiting the range of educational choices open to parents and students. Likewise, since professional educators do not seem to understand the long-term effects of schooling any better than parents do, there is no compelling reason why the profession should be empowered to rule out alternatives that appeal to parents, even if they seem educationally 'unsound.'"[32]

Academic excellence is not the only aspect of education that matters; parents (including professional educators) may care as much or more about character, about creativity, about social skills. We can demand that schools -- and students -- be adequate, that they meet proficiency standards, but whether to seek excellence is surely a matter of personal decision. Surveys and the choices that parents make show clearly, however, that they **do** care about the quality of schooling, however they may define school it. They may not have a clear understanding of the specific theme of a school, or know how it rates on test scores, but they respond to their perceptions of quality.*

Location **is** important; other things being equal, parents will generally choose a school near home. If they perceive educational advantages to another school farther away, however, most parents say that they prefer that school, and they back this up with their actions. The pattern of school applications in cities implementing choice by no means supports the assumption that parents only want neighborhood schools. In Fall River, for example, 39 percent of the kindergarten parents gave first preference to non-neighborhood schools, despite the fact that transportation is not provided by school system. In Worcester, 38 percent of the newly-enrolling elementary students this year (1,744 out of 4,603) enrolled voluntarily in non-neighborhood schools. In Lynn, 26 percent of the first graders (331 out of 1,297) enrolled in non-neighborhood schools. The majority (57 percent) of parents of children entering first grade in Boston this

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* A 1989 study by a national organization helping relocating corporate employees to select school in their new communities found that 53 percent wanted "a school system or private school in the second highest range (from the 60th percentile to the 80th percentile) on composite scores on scholastic examinations. . . . Less than one-third say they cant their child in a top-scoring . . . school system or private school. . . . It is more important to parents that their children be successful than that the school earn the highest marks." William L. Bainbridge, "Helping Families Cope With School Choices," Westerville, OH: School Match, 1990, 4.

year requested non-neighborhood schools, as did 52 percent of parents of children entering sixth grade.

This is true even when race is at issue. Among seven middle schools in Boston's East Zone, 26 percent of white pupils entering sixth grade chose the Gavin School in largely-white South Boston, but 39 percent chose the McCormack in largely-black Columbia Point. In the West Zone, 44 percent of white applicants chose the Irving School, in racially-mixed Roslindale, while only 17 percent chose the Shaw in suburban West Roxbury and 18 percent chose the Timilty in the heart of inner-city (and black) Roxbury.*

The schools selected by minority parents follow the same pattern. In Boston's North Zone, for example, 31 percent of black applicants chose the Barnes in East Boston, an area where few black families live, while only 10 percent chose the Dearborn, in a heavily-minority part of the city.

As a parent counselor in Boston wrote me recently, "The first question asked by most students and parents is, 'Is it a good school?' when we make suggestions. Location does make a difference to many but it is only occasionally that a convenient location is requested, but mostly a 'safe' location, and considering what is going on in Boston, we expect this to be a prominent concern."[33]

But do parents always make wise choices? Of course not, nor should that be the test of whether they should be **allowed** to choose, any more than it is with the choice of how much TV

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* Contra the conclusion of Christine Rossell, that controlled choice will not work in most cities because "[t]here is no evidence that whites will willingly transfer their children out of a neighborhood school and into a minority school across town without some incentives" such as those provided by a magnet school. She also reports, inaccurately, that 40 percent of white parents in Boston did not get their first choice (The Carrot or the Stick for School Desegregation Policy, Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1990, 198, 200.

choose, any more than it is with the choice of how much TV their children will watch or what food they will eat. After all, if there are schools the choice of which would be positively harmful to children, why are we now assigning children to those schools involuntarily? It is an appropriate task of public policy to **assure that there are no truly bad choices** through some form of public licensing and oversight, but not to substitute the judgment of an official for that of a parent simply because the parent does not take into account every nuance of school quality. It is not as though educators themselves were in agreement about the characteristics of a good school.

We should not be too quick to accept that "ordinary" parents cannot make sound choices among the school available, nor to dismiss the possibility that the process of doing so -- with appropriate support -- will in fact strengthen them as parents.[34]

Nor should we take lightly the human significance of being allowed and encouraged to take responsibility for decisions about education. As John Coons points out, "[t]he right to form families and to determine the scope of their children's practical liberty is for most men and women the primary occasion for choice and responsibility. One does not have to be rich or well placed to experience the family. The opportunity over a span of fifteen or twenty years to attempt the transmission of one's deepest values to a beloved child provides a unique arena for the creative impulse. Here is the communication of ideas in its most elemental mode. Parental expression, for all its invisibility to the media, is an activity with profound First Amendment implications."[35]

If, as some argue, there are "drugged parents who won't and probably can't make informed choices for their children,"[36] that is all the more reason to create systems of universal choice that create pressure to improve all schools, not just offer magnet

the school system. After all, what is the superior merit of an assignment, for the children of neglectful parents, based upon neighborhood residence alone?

No, the risk that a few parents will make ill-informed choices or fail to choose altogether should not carry much weight. While society is not always successful in protecting the children of neglectful parents, the adequacy of schooling -- since it is inherently public even if in a non-governmental school -- is relatively simple to oversee. We should perhaps be more concerned about the children who suffer today from neglectful public schools, in systems in which placement decisions are made by lines on a map.

Fourth Charge: **Choice is illusory because many parents are disappointed as a result of desegregation and other restrictions.**

"[E]ven a cursory look at existing 'controlled choice' programs shows that controls for purposes of racial balance seriously compromise choice," writes Abigail Thernstrom in her critique of programs in Massachusetts.

Given desegregation mandates, one could reply, the question is not whether choice is "compromised" but whether it is made available to a larger proportion of parents than under any other method of achieving the same result. An inevitable cost of freedom is to experience any remaining constraint as galling. So long as children are simply assigned to schools involuntarily on the basis of where they live, of course, the issue of disappointment does not arise, but it is unavoidable when parents

are given the opportunity to indicate other preferences and when no school is guaranteed a captive clientele.

Nor do magnet schools resolve this problem of disappoint-ment and involuntary assignments. Under Boston's previous desegregation plan, approximately 25 percent of the system's pupils attended magnet schools on the basis of choice, while the remainder -- many unsuccessful applicants to magnet schools -- were assigned without choice on the basis of where they lived. By contrast, the entry-level grades assigned under controlled choice last year and this year are **more** desegregated than was the case before, and the great majority of these pupils were assigned to schools that their parents had indicated were acceptable: 85 percent of the first graders, 87 percent of the sixth graders, and 91 percent of the ninth graders in Boston were assigned to schools that had been selected by their parents, and in most cases to their first choices.

Other Boston pupils, it is true, were assigned involuntarily. A closer look at the figures reveals, however, that this was not primarily attributable to the requirements of desegregation.

Of Boston's fifteen high schools, six had no freshmen assigned involuntarily this year, while in some cases having many disappointed applicants. On the other hand, seven other Boston high schools did not attract enough applicants of any racial/ethnic category to fill their available places in the ninth grade voluntarily, even if race were not a consideration in making assignments.

These mandatory assignments were necessary because, after increasing the assignable capacity of the more popular schools in order to accommodate as many students as possible, there remained hundreds without school places. Desegregation considerations did not "compromise choice;" choice was

unfortunately denied to some without regard to race, creed, or color and they were assigned to schools they had not chosen because of space limitations elsewhere in the system.

There was only one Boston high school out of fifteen to which freshmen of one racial/ethnic category were assigned involuntarily while those of another who had made it their first choice were denied admission, in order to meet desegregation requirements.

The fact that students of all racial/ethnic categories must be assigned involuntarily because of an insufficient supply of places in acceptable schools is deplorable. Keep in mind, however, that Boston, like other school systems, has **always** assigned students to these same schools. Choice has not changed that reality; it has simply brought it into a sharp focus that creates pressure both to improve or close those schools and also to allow other entrants into the educational marketplace.

Even if desegregation were not a concern -- as it must be in Boston because of a past history of intentional segregation -- it is difficult to conceive of circumstances under which all pupils could be assigned to their parents' first choice, unless enrollment declines and budget surpluses had led to ample slack capacity in the more popular schools. Some schools will always, for a variety of reasons, attract more applicants than they are able to accommodate; this is a problem in Great Britain as well, though official policies encouraging parent choice are not subject to desegregation requirements.

A wise assignment policy will use every bit of space in the schools that parents want while leaving the schools they do **not** want under-enrolled so far as possible; over several years the more attractive options are replicated and the less attractive are improved, closed or converted unless, of course, they are already

educating effectively and merely need help in presenting themselves to parents.

Altogether, only 1.7 percent of the students assigned to the entry levels of Boston schools this Fall (238 of 14,041 first, sixth and ninth graders) were either denied a place or assigned involuntarily to a place that another student was denied in order to meet the requirements of desegregation.

Controlled choice is a method of assuring that choice functions in a way that is fair to all applicants; whether desegregation is one of the constraints under which it operates depends upon what is required in a particular situation. Controlled choice would function perfectly well to assure fairness and to create pressure for every school to improve in a community where race desegregation was not at issue. Controls would still be needed: there must be **some** fair basis for deciding who will be admitted to a school with too many applicants and who -- pending creation of new space or new options -- will be assigned involuntarily.

Fifth Charge: **Parents are misled about the options available in order to create an appearance that choice is generally satisfactory to those affected by it.**

"Many will be 'counseled' to list as their top 'choices' schools that they would never freely select," complains Thernstrom in her critique of controlled choice, quoting a report in which I

criticised "'the failure or inability of the parent information staff to counsel parents away from choices which they should have known could not be honored.' In other words [she goes on], if the parent information staff does its job properly, families will list only those schools in which there is room for children of their race. If the families comply, the state comes out ahead, since it can report that a large percentage of parents get one of their desired schools."[37]

This charge is unfair, and based upon a common misunderstanding of how a well-designed system of parent choice functions. Just as high school guidance counselors commonly recommend that students apply to more than one college and include some less-competitive selections, to assure that they get in somewhere, so information center staff encourage parents to distribute their preferences sensibly among school that they find acceptable.

The process of making assignments does not discourage parents from selecting a very popular school as their first choice. Here's how it works. The applications of students eligible to apply for ninth grade, for example, are assigned random numbers, and each is dealt with in turn. Those with low numbers are assured of assignment to their first-choice schools, unless the places available have been filled by applicants with even lower random numbers. If an applicant's first-choice school has been filled, the assignment program checks whether space is available in the second-choice school, and so on through the options indicated. There is thus no advantage to **not** selecting a popular school as first or second choice, since that will not affect chances of getting into a third-choice school: each applicant is dealt with in turn until the attempt has been made to make an assignment based upon all of her/his preferences indicated on the application.

Perhaps one student in five does not receive an assignment in the first round; none receive an involuntary assignment. An applicant with a high random number who has selected only the more popular schools may receive no assignment in the first round (generally in April). The parents are contacted and encouraged to make a new selection of schools, since those they had requested are now full. They may request to be placed on the waiting list for one or two of the original choices, but they are also counseled about which schools still have space available.

During the summer months, the parent information centers are able to issue assignments on the spot to parents who select a school with space. If a parent does not eventually select a school with space available, the student will be assigned to the school nearest where he or she lives that does have space.

My criticism of parent information last year in Boston was that those counseling parents did not know which schools had no space available after the first round of assign-ments, and thus many parents wasted their efforts by requesting schools that were already full. For example, more than half of those requesting sixth grade seats applied to the four most popular schools out of 22, already virtually full. "This represents an unacceptably high proportion of disappointed applicants," I wrote in the sentence quoted in part by Thernstrom, "as a result of the failure or inability . .".[38]

After all, the whole point of offering a second chance to apply is so that parents will take a closer look at schools that might not be familiar to them -- and perhaps discover some unexpected merits.

There is no special virtue in disappointing parents repeatedly, unless it is to make a point for the critics of school choice.

Sixth Charge: **School choice will be exploited by fanatics of every stripe and/or unscrupulous entrepreneurs to provide divisive or educationally inadequate options.**

Perhaps the best way to answer this speculation -- advanced even by such otherwise sensible and intellectually-open educational leaders as Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers and California's Bill Honig -- is to point to the history of parent choice in the United States and other nations.

The charge that educational diversity will lead to social divisiveness, as children are nurtured by fanatical teachers determined to instil intolerance and hatred, has been made over and over for the past two centuries in Western Europe and in the United States. Horace Mann saw a threat in the peaceful Shakers; Catholic schools have been accused in many nations of being the advance guard of Papal tyranny; the desire of Protestant parents in the Netherlands for their own schools, the elite feared, would destroy the common school "by which the nation is knit together."[39]

More recently, the request of Moslem parents in Western Europe for public support for Islamic schools comparable to that received by Christian and Jewish schools has been perceived as deeply threatening by many on the Left, otherwise ready to support any demand made in the name of the social and cultural aspirations of immigrants.[40]

Although the idea that allowing differences among schools that correspond to the desires of parents is often advanced and rarely challenged, there is **no** evidence that Catholic or Protestant or

Jewish schools have produced graduates who are more intolerant, fanatical, or undemocratic than the graduates of public schools.* The Netherlands is a tolerant (perhaps even **too** tolerant) society, though 70 percent of its children attend non-government schools, and the choice of publicly-funded denominational schools in Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Germany and other democracies has been a source rather of political peace than of conflict.

Nor does the existence of immigration raise the stakes of educational monopoly, as some claim. Despite the mythology that surrounds the schools on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and other ports of entry, there is no evidence that the children of immigrant families who chose religiously-based non-government schools turned out to be less desirable Americans.**

But would unscrupulous entrepreneurs take advantage of choice policies to create cut-rate profit-making operations providing an inadequate education with sufficient glitz to attract the unsophisticated? Surely this is a danger that can easily be averted through accreditation and inspection, either by government or by semi-public associations. It is not as though the present method of exercising control through geographical monopolies on the provision of publicly-funded education has resulted in uniformly acceptable quality.

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* Alan Peshkin's study of a fundamentalist Christian school found that its students developed many admirable qualities that public schools could well seek to emulate and, despite his distaste for the enterprise, he was not able to point to evidence of negative outcomes (God's Choice, Univer-sity of Chicago Press 1986). James Coleman and others who have studied urban Catholic high schools note their positive impact on social responsibility and racial tolerance.

** Thernstrom argues, inaccurately, that the schools of no other country have such a large task of turning immigrant children into "citizens with a common commitment to the . . . political and economic culture." To the contrary, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland and other nations of Europe now have a higher proportion of immigrants than do we.

The experience of other nations with assuring educational standards at least as high as those of American schools through means other than direct government operation proves that the danger can be readily averted.

The Massachusetts experience with choice among public schools suggests another important guarantee against truly awful schools: a system of parent information and counseling with a special mission of reaching poor and language-minority parents with accurate and user-friendly information. While we are not yet fully satisfied and perhaps never will be with our ability to communicate effectively with all parents, we can claim with confidence that our efforts in this area are ahead of any others in the world.

No system of school choice that fails to plan for informing and counseling parents, especially those who do not respond to the printed word, deserves to be called fair. **Real** equal access to information and the skills to use it are essential to the empowerment of poor and language minority parents and their children through education.

Seventh Charge: **School choice will not lead to real diversity because school staff lack the imagination and professionalism to create real alternatives.**

Without real **choices**, authentic diversity, a policy promoting parent choice will produce half a loaf at best; it will be better than simply assigning pupils based on where they live, but not

much. Yet this may prove the most difficult aspect of putting choice to work for educational reform.

This is not to suggest that schools must be wildly different for parent choice to be a success. A system of parent choice should in fact identify the ways in which schools should be alike, the non-negotiable common elements that each of them should address. We have not always done enough, even in highly centralized school systems, to assure that every pupil has the opportunity to acquire a common body of knowledge and skills. Parents will choose more confidently if they know that, however schools may differ in philosophy, teaching methods, and social climate, their children will learn the essential at any one of them.

It remains important, however, to encourage the staff of each school to develop its distinctive character in response to their own educational vision and the desires of parents. This will not be achieved through adopting the latest fad or imitating what another school has done successfully; it requires thoughtful hard work over months and years, and a determination to satisfy some parents very much and serve some children very well, rather than providing a lowest common denominator education.

Creating a few magnet schools is not so difficult. Every school system has some teachers and a principal or two who are eager to try out new ideas and create a school that reflects their strongly-held views about what works. But to expect the staff of **every** school to become clear about their shared mission is to ask that they change the habits shaped by their training and careers in bureaucratically-organized school systems.

As a reform, parent choice has in common with school based management and "restructuring" that all depend upon changing the culture of each school. While staff development and ample planning time are essential, they are not sufficient. Public

schools that enroll pupils on the basis of where they live function within an environment that does not encourage a clear and distinctive mission; they must serve pupils who come for geographical rather than educational reasons. As the recent Rand study notes, "[z]oned schools are, in effect, the result of a long series of accommodations to the interests of particular groups, diverse theories of schooling, and control measures intended to guarantee accountability to outside authorities. The essence of zoned school administration is to find a critical path among external constraints, not to create a school that best fits current students."[41]

An Eastern European economist pointed out recently that we have plenty of experience in going from free markets to controlled markets, but very little in going the opposite way. To persuade staff to behave in bold and innovative ways while they continue to function within a centrally-governed hierarchical structure may be unrealistic, especially if the rewards available are not tied to entrepreneurial risk-taking. Or, as The Economist observed of efforts to reform the Soviet economy, "[c]entral planning, though crazy, is reassuring" (April 28, 1990). This helps to explain the disappointing experience of perestroika in the Soviet Union, and it seems likely to limit the results of school-based management within present constraints as well.

Controlled choice as it is implemented in Massachusetts may, in the final analysis, simply not go far enough to shake up the culture of mediocrity and low expectations that dominates so many schools. As with Soviet economic reform, our "efforts to introduce outside competition [may] reflect the primary lesson that has been learned from the reform process so far: that the old system is extremely resilient and stable (if highly wasteful and inefficient), that it must be subject to a more serious shock, to more serious competition, if it is to begin to change fundamentally."[42]

Schools are getting better, becoming more purposeful and responsive as a result of parent choice in Massachusetts cities, but the pace of change may simply be too slow to benefit thousands of children whose education has been neglected. And the education system's resistance to change may reassert itself, finding ways to accommodate the pressures of parent choice as it has so many other reform initiatives.

Such reflections have created interest in how new educational options can be created within or outside of present structures. Here are some of the possibilities:

(1) Groups of teachers could be encouraged to open schools that are smaller and less formally organized than the conventional model, and operate within the public system free of the usual constraints -- provided that a sufficient number of parents want what they offer. This "charter school" idea has been proposed by Albert Shanker, and implemented in East Harlem; it has the potential of expanding the available options significantly. The limitation is that most teachers are not motivated to invest great amounts of uncompensated time and energy in creating new educational alternatives.

(2) Pupils could be permitted, as in Minnesota, to cross school system boundaries and attend schools operated by other public systems. While this may have significant benefits for the individual whose parents make the effort, it does not affect the quality of the schools that are being left, and it presumes that nearby school systems provide schools that are significantly different and better. If they do, they may have no space!

(3) Pupils could be permitted to attend existing non-public schools with their tuition paid by public funds, as in Milwaukee. This increases the options available to those individuals, but it does not represent a strategy to expand the overall supply of

high-quality educational alternatives. The exclusion of explicitly religious schools from participation in the Milwaukee program in order to avoid First Amendment difficulties raises troubling issues of equal treatment of belief and unbelief. Recent attempts by a group of minority parents to seek a remedy in the Kansas City desegregation case vindicating the Fourteenth Amendment rights of their children through tuitioning them into integrated non-public schools, including explicitly religious schools, goes a step further in this respect than the Milwaukee program.

(4) New educational options could be "franchised," as proposed recently by Ted Kolderie, suggesting that other providers of schooling be permitted to enter into direct competition with school systems. "The exclusive franchise means the district can keep students in and can keep other school-teaching organizations out. To withdraw it the state would have to make it possible for some other public organization to sponsor" schools and for parents to enroll their children.[43]

This would require, under Kolderie's scheme, a process of chartering alternatives (which might take the form of "a public corporation, a non-profit, a professional association, or a co-operative") developed by educators, groups of parents, "social-service agencies or private groups in the learning business."

The state would assure that schools met performance standards and were not based on offensive [to whom? -- there's the rub!] premises; "it may not be possible to control this with criteria. It may be simpler to require an applicant-group to win the approval of, or to be sponsored by, a public body which the state can trust to make a common-sense judgment."

The Kolderie proposal has much in common with the actual -- and successful -- functioning of educational alternatives in the Netherlands, and could be fine-tuned from the Dutch experience.

It seems likely that we will be exploring and piloting such proposals intensively over the next years, as our efforts come up against the limitations of choice among the present options as a means of achieving fundamental reform. Any of them could fit within the framework already created in communities that have adopted universal controlled .choice.

While parent information centers in Massachusetts provide information only about options within a single school district, there is no reason the system could not be adapted to offer options on a metropolitan basis or to include non-public schools, if a policy decision were made that this would be appropriate.

The key to the effectiveness of parent information centers is that they are tied directly into the process of registering for school and receiving an assignment. It is not difficult to imagine that a consortium of education providers in a geographical area, under varied sponsorship, could support a center for parent outreach, counseling and assignment on behalf of them all.

V. Summary

Controlled choice, as practiced in Massachusetts, is not a cure-all for the crisis in American education, but we have found it powerful in expanding the options available to children from poor families, and in putting pressure upon urban schools to become both more effective and more responsive. The next stage in the development of choice must be to find ways to expand the options available in response to the demands of parents and the vision of teachers.

1. Charles L. Glenn, Choice of Schools in Six Nations, U. S. Department of Education (1989) discusses Belgium, Canada, France, Great Britain, The Netherlands and (West) Germany.

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Charles L. Glenn is Executive Director of the Office of Educational Equity and also of the Boston/Cheslea Urban Team. He has been responsible for urban education and equity programs in the Massachusetts Department of Education since 1970.